

Diagnosing the Workplace:

Teamwork in a Non-Teamwork World

at Mark Twain Elementary

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Feedback

EDET 770

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October 2004

Teamwork in a Non-Teamwork World 2

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Rien ne réussit comme le succès
"Nothing Succeeds like success"
Dumas

Mark Twain Elementary has had a continuing habit of excellence and success. Over the past two years, however, the school has had to face two very difficult challenges. Last year, in spite of ever improving test scores and receiving back to back awards of excellence the staff was required to move from *its* previous reading and language arts programs to the district and state mandated "Open Court" program. This required a complete realignment of every aspect of every grade levels' teaching day.

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The second challenge came at the beginning of this year when a new principal was assigned to Mark Twain. The new principal had come from a similar successful school in the district. *But for the faculty at Mark Twain,* it was still a case of not knowing what really to expect after having become used to the relationship we had with the former principal. Would the school's staff be able to adjust to all these changes and continue the practices that contributed to its success over the years? And more importantly, what were the fundamental elements that contributed to this school's success and how do the mentoring relationships within and between grade levels play into this habit of success?

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Comment: Tell me how this opening ties to the task of looking at the workplace as a place where people learn. Are you looking for the teachers to learn a new methodology/curriculum? Are you looking at the new principal as the learner? You haven't really described a 'practice' in which these folks are learners.

Data: Setting

Mark Twain Elementary sits in a suburban track of North Long Beach that calls itself Lakewood Village. A couple blocks north of Long Beach City College, the campus has a park and middle school as one neighbor with churches and comfortable single-

family homes as the others. Green lawns and plenty of shady trees surround the campus itself.

I came to this campus as a computer lab teacher and site technology coordinator in the Fall of 2001 as the school was in the midst of competing for its second prestigious award. Mark Twain Elementary ended up receiving recognition as a 2002 California Distinguished School, having received recognition as a U.S. Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1999 (Long Beach Unified School District, 2004).



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Comment: Excellent. I'm a sucker for folks who actually take advantage of what technology will let us do. Nice snap.

Thus this school and its record of excellence stood in sharp contrast to the school I'd left. Previously I have compared the two schools on the basis of leadership, teamwork, technology, professionalism and morale. Briefly, I'd come to the conclusion that it wasn't a matter of the work ethic of the teachers and most definitely not a matter of which school had the larger investment in technology. The administrative leadership, the level of community and parental involvement and the staff's expectation to succeed seem to be the largest differences between this campus and my former school (Bustillos, 2001; Bustillos, 2002).

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Data: Personnel

Out of a teaching staff of 43, one-fourth or 13 have been teaching less than 15-years. That is also about the same ratio of teachers who have been teaching at Twain for less than five-years: one-fourth or 12 teachers. For six of the 43 teachers teaching is a second career. Out of an office/custodial/part-time staff of 16 all but two have been

working at Twain for five years or more. The one new office staff person this year is the principal.

Grade levels tend to work together as CoPs (for the purposes of this analysis I've grouped the Special Day Classes as one "grade level" and Special Services such as RSP, computer lab & speech as another "grade level"). The ratio of "veteran" *staff member* to "newcomer" is 5-to-2 or better in six of the eight grade levels. Over the past four years I have noticed that there has tended to be a natural pairing of "newcomer" with "veteran" in most grade levels with little or no orchestration by the administration. The consistency and success of this support has depended largely on the leadership within the grade level, with some influence by the proximity of the classes of the same grade level with one another and the sense of access of those classes towards fellow grade level members (see Appendix A).

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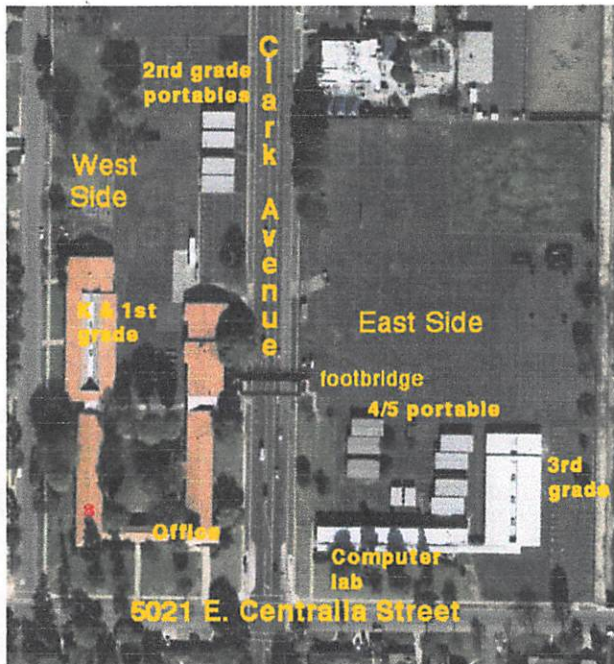
Comment: I don't get the syntax in that sentence.

Data: Physical Infrastructure

Mark Twain Elementary is the first K-5 school I've knowⁿ where its campus is split down the middle by a busy street. A concrete footbridge, needed to manage the heavy daily traffic from one side to the other side of the campus, joins the two parts of the campus over the street.

The west side of the campus houses grades K through second, the library, RSP, Speech, cafeteria, auditorium and office. The east side of the campus houses grades three through five and the computer lab. Two lower grade Special Day classes are on the west side and two upper grade Special Day classes are on the east side. One four/five literacy

class is on the east side. After school recreation is housed on the playground for all grade level on the east side.



The majority of the classrooms on the west side are part of the U-shaped two wings of the original school buildings designed in a "mission style" (buildings A & B). There are 20 classrooms on this side of the campus, of which four are portables set out behind the cafeteria near the west side

playground. This year four of the six second grade classrooms occupy the portables.

On the east side there are also two buildings in an L-shape (buildings C & D). Of the 20 classrooms on this side of the campus seven are housed in portables. Three of the four fifth grade classes, three of the four fourth grade classes and one third grade classroom occupy the east side portables.

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Comment: Okay, you put the info here. There must be a reason. Tell me. What does this physical info tell me about how people learn, or why they don't.

Observation: Physical Structure

& Ease of Consistent Informal Dialogue

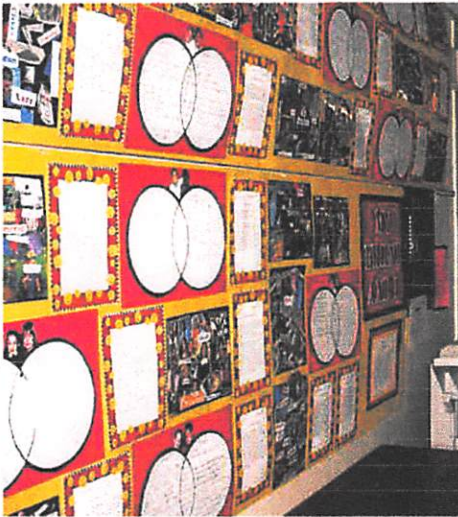
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Comment: Ah, okay. Here it comes, I hope.

Spending most of my working week on the east side I am most familiar with the working relationships of the teachers on this side of the school but in my job as

technology coordinator and computer lab

instructor I've been in and seen every classroom in action and seen the students with and without their teachers in the computer lab. So, in the three years that I've been here, I've most definitely had the campus tour that no visiting dignitary ever gets.



Simply put, on the east side of campus in building D all of the interior

doors are open and there is a continual level of interaction between the teachers in those rooms. Any person who has spent time on an elementary campus is familiar with the relatively negative complaining heard in the teachers' lounge regarding their students' "diminishing intelligence." The nature of the job can lend itself to that, but what I'm referring to is a spirit of mutual support which I've found most obviously in the group of seven third grade teachers in building D. Yes, they are frustrated over all the things this year's students cannot seem to do without continual reminding and re-teaching but coupled with that is a mutual determination to support one another to do what they can with this year's crop of students. Even when they're not "teaming" they support one another as a team.

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Comment: An example would be great.

Thus, even though *the* Open Court *reading program* has commandeered most of the teaching day *teachers* still find ways to do non-ditto/non-seatwork projects, usually headed by one or two of the seven teachers and her group of parent volunteers. For example, last Spring one teacher organized and gathered the necessary parent support so that the students could make miniature wooden models of the Queen Mary ship beginning with blank wooden stock and ending with a fully painted ship complete with smoke stacks. A short time later another couple teachers organized the creation of pink paper-Mache pigs after their classes had read *Charlotte's Web*.

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Thus, clearly the physical proximity of this group and ease of access lends itself to this level of collaboration and cooperation. It isn't so open as to be overly intrusive to the individual teacher (as I've seen in the "wall-less buildings I taught in at a neighboring school district). And, in fact, the group of seven does not always work as one large group but usually pair off in twos or threes depending on the task at hand.

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Comment: How does this show collaboration/communication thorough physical proximity?

As for how "newcomers" come to access the practice, in the case of the two newer members of the third grade team, for example, the natural pairing with a more veteran teacher tends to take care of that. But at the same time the "newcomer" does come with her own unique experiences and those experiences are more than welcomed by the group. This lends itself to a sense that all the members of the team are equal and there are no barriers to full inclusion or participation. This is a self-selecting self-reproducing process.

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Comment: Good work here.

In the case of the fourth grade teachers who work in self-contained portables, two of the teachers support the one more junior member and manage their relationship mostly by quick phone calls during the day or by touching base during break times. Some slight

age differences aside, they've developed a working relationship and support for one another based on their friendship and common tasks. The fourth teacher, who is in building D with the third grade teachers, tends to choose her own level of interaction that works for her. Again, there are no real barriers to full participation and this processes is self-selecting and self-replicating.

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Comment: What process?

Of the three grade levels on the east side the fifth grade is the least collaborative and most "self-contained." But it also has the largest ratio of "newcomer" to "veteran," two for two. Where as there has been a natural, non-coerced, pairing of veteran with newcomer in both the third and fourth grades, the two fifth grade veterans have tended to maintain a "closed door" policy. There are grade level meetings and in the past they've had days for grade level planning, but the kind of natural spontaneous sharing of ideas and insights that happens in the third and fourth grade groups does not seem to exist, except during those prompted official meetings and activities.

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Comment: Iave & Wenger talk a lot about identity in a practice. Are there identity tension or issues here?

The question is whether this pattern is one of personality empowered by closed doors or closed doors preventing mutual sharing. I would have to say that it is a matter of personality using their closed doors. In the case of the fourth grade team they get around the closed doors with frequent spontaneous calls and spending all their breaks together. The one third grade teacher in the portables may not have the shared hallway to use as a inclusion conduit, but there is enough movement between classes and enough communication from the group as a whole to make up for the fact that she only has one door whereas the others have two.

Ipolin 11/16/04 9:00 PM

Comment: Wait a sec. You're talking about sharing among teachers at one site. Is the practice the practice of teaching 5th grade at this school? Or is the practice something larger about teaching? If it is a larger view of teaching, the question is what sort of access do these teachers have to the profession? Do they go to conferences? Read journals? Visit other schools?

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Conclusion

The practices of community, communication and support (teamwork), that proved so successful before Open Court and before the change in administration are still at work and still providing a means for these to succeed at their task and contribute to the success of their neighbors and students. |

You may wish to rewrite. This paper currently is a C+

Ipolin 11/16/04 9:02 PM

Comment: The fact that there is NO evidence of access to or interest in professional knowledge around something like Open Court suggests to me that you are looking at a very tiny view of practice and you need to think more broadly about education and teachers' role in the field as something other than implementers of canned curriculum.

Appendix A

Twain Classroom teachers listed by grade level

Grade	Age			Gender		Years Teaching		Years at Twain	
	30s	40s	50s	F	M	>15	<15	>5	<5
5 th	0	3	1	3	1	2	2	2	2
4 th	1	2	1	4	0	2	2	3	1
3 rd	2	4	1	7	0	5	2	5	2
2 nd	0	7	0	7	0	7	0	5	2
1 st	0	5	2	7	0	6	1	5	2
K	1	5	0	6	0	5	1	5	1
SDC	2	2	0	4	0	1	3	4	0
Spec. Serv.	0	4	0	3	1	2	2	2	2
Totals	6	32	5	41	2	30	13	31	12

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